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JUDGEMENT DAY

Richard Bell, *Judgement Day (Bell's Theorem)*, 2007

At first sight, *Judgement Day (Bell's Theorem)*, 2007, by Queensland Indigenous artist Richard Bell is a most unprepossessing work. Its background is a series of hastily executed coloured tiles and roundels familiar to us from desert art, across which skeins of black and white paint have been splashed. On top of this is stencilled in a variety of different typefaces, as though to echo the sentiment being expressed, "Australian Art Does Not Exist". Running down the left-hand side of the work are more words, although they are sometimes hard to read, being written black on black. At over two by three metres, the painting seems absurdly large, succeeding merely in drawing attention to the artist's evident lack of care. The work appears almost indifferently executed, using the quickest and most labour-saving of means, with the splashes of paint reading as much as a form of defacement or cancelling out as indicating any kind of spontaneity or authenticity.

But what could it mean to say that "Australian Art Does Not Exist"? Of course, we know that it exists. Exhibitions of Australian art are held all the time. Our state galleries have rooms devoted to it. The subject is taught at art colleges and universities throughout the country. Histories of Australian art continue to be written, stretching back alternately to first European colonisation or to Aboriginal art. More than this, what could it mean for an Indigenous artist to say that Australian art does not exist, when Aboriginal culture above any other underpins the notion of "Australia" today, from Qantas logos on aeroplanes, to Olympics closing ceremonies, to tourist advertisements urging people to visit the country?

In fact, Bell's work offers a profound critique of "Aboriginality" in this sense, of Indigenous art allowing white Australians some presumed spiritual access to the land. In interviews, he contests what he dismissively calls "ooga-booga" art, that is, art made in outback art centres under white supervision and bought and sold by white Australians, claiming that it is not really Aboriginal art. And in the series of works that first made his name – part of the same series as *Judgement Day* – Bell produced a number of provocative aphorisms that attempted to summarise the consequences of his argument. "Aboriginal Art – it's a White Thing", he wrote in *Scientia E*

Metaphysica (2002). “Australian Art – it’s an Aboriginal Thing”, he responded in *Telstra Painting* (2006).

The issues Bell raises continue to be debated in Australian public life. The recent Federal Liberal Government’s intervention in the Northern Territory (a policy continued by the current Labour Government, for all of its opposition to it) raises the question of the continued viability of Aboriginal communities riven by problems of alcoholism, sexual abuse and the collapse of tribal law. The current Labour Government was elected on the promise to apologise for the “stolen generations” of Aborigines taken from their families during a policy of enforced assimilation, although its subsequent apology was not accompanied by any matching financial compensation. The Cape York Land Council’s Noel Pearson argues for the economic integration of remote Aboriginal communities via such things as mining and eco-tourism in order to guarantee their future sustainability. And along the same lines, there have recently been moves to take Indigenous children out of outback communities and place them in boarding schools in cities so that they may be given the skills necessary to earn a living in contemporary Australia.

In all of these matters, we are confronted by a fundamental contradiction, an irresolvable impasse or irreconcilability. There can be no solution to these problems, at least while Australia in its current form continues to exist. It is evident for one part that remote Aboriginal cultures and communities are rendered unsustainable by European settlement. The very measures that are designed to make them viable (economic integration within white society, the educating of children in cities) are also the things that will lead to their ineluctable demise. It is evident for another part that no apology or sum of money could ever be enough to compensate the survivors of the stolen generations or to reverse the destructive effects of white colonisation upon Aboriginal society. Nothing is more certain than that in the not-too-distant future there will be no or very few tribal communities, that Aboriginal identity will be – like all identities in our modern democracies – a matter of self-identification, of “coming out”, with no authentic racial or cultural ties.

What then of Aboriginal people when this occurs? Who could claim to be Aboriginal or to speak for Aborigines? It is at this difficult end-point that Bell’s art properly begins. Aboriginality is not some substantive quality in his work, but more a certain speaking voice or place of enunciation. Listening to it, it is almost as though we are hearing ourselves speak, as though what is at stake is a kind of conscience or “whispering in our hearts”. If Aboriginality continues to exist in Bell’s work, it is only as the paradox or contradiction involved in saying “Aboriginal Art – it’s a White Thing”. As we see in his work here, it is nothing to be found in his art, in anything actually visible, but is rather a kind of impossible ethical fact or judgement. (And, in various ways, *Re-enactment*, 2006, by Gordon Bennett and *Annie Ah Sam*, 2008, by Vernon Ah Kee also embody this same impossibility: Bennett insofar as he dares to imagine a different founding of Australia; Ah Kee insofar as it is the same archive that once oppressed his ancestors that now allows him to preserve their memory.)

Bell is correct in thinking that without this “Aboriginality” there would be no Australia. “Aboriginal Art – it’s a White Thing” and “Australian Art – it’s an Aboriginal Thing” are essentially the same statement. For all of its systematic exclusion and repression of Aborigines, white identity has always relied upon

Indigenous culture to tell it what it means to be Australian. But what would happen if we understood Aboriginal art as not "Australian", as not involved in the exercise of constituting a national identity, not at all about some image of a unified "Australia"? We can see this irreconcilability figured in those recent hangings of Australian art in galleries, which attempt to show Aboriginal and European art together, or in recent histories of art of this country, which begin their narratives with something like rock painting. What they inadvertently make clear is that there is simply no connection between the two different cultures. Aboriginal art is many things, but it is not "Australian". If anything, the rise of something like dot painting disarticulates or makes impossible any notion of a shared Australian culture.

It is this impossibility that is played out in every collection of "Australian" art today, and what makes any such collection so revealingly symptomatic. For what unified system of taste or connoisseurship could put together, as here, John Mawurndjul's *Dilebang*, 2008, and Jon Cattapan's *Untitled*, 2007? Or Lorraine Connelly-Northey's *Possum Skin Coat*, 2005, and Gordon Shepherdson's *Bullock in Evening Sky*, 2009? Or even Gordon Bennett's *Home Décor (After Margaret Preston)*, 2009, and Helga Groves' *Water Column*, 2009? What lineage of formal or stylistic development could connect the two works? What single, unified narrative could hold the two together? For a long time, the story Australian art could be told as a history of responses to a distant European and then American culture. At first, these responses were understood to be servile and imitative; then, later, ironic and appropriative. In the end, it doesn't matter which. And, following this logic, museums and collectors could place Australian art works in a coherent historical sequence. The story of Australian art, with differences, followed that of Europe and America. And it was these differences that made it Australian. (We might think, for example, of Luke Roberts' *Andy*, 2009, in this regard.)

Today, however, this narrative no longer holds. The story of Australian art is increasingly unable to be told in terms of its distance from some faraway centre of culture, as though civilization always occurred somewhere else and Australian art was forever to be judged by some prior model of achievement. Many of the works here are not national in this sense (and thus to be judged against somewhere else), but rather propose a new syncretic world culture, in which there are no centres and no established hierarchies. Art of value would occur precisely in this place and not elsewhere. We might think in this regard, for example, of Tim Johnson's *Full Moon*, 2005, Judy Watson's *Bloom*, 2009, and Eugene Carchesio's *Machine-Age Hercules*, 2010. Another story is related here, one not of Australia's isolation and difference from the rest of the world, but of its ongoing connection with it: a history of immigration and emigration, of white as well as black art that does not seek to create a national identity. It is often abstract, but it is also often work by women that represents flowers and not gumtrees, studio interiors and not shearing sheds or cattle stations. (The work of Sandra Selig and Natalya Hughes in this exhibition in some ways comes out of this alternative, non-national tradition of art made by women.)

Returning finally to Bell's work, it is perhaps the case that the question of Aboriginal identity can only be asked insofar as there remains an Australian art. Or, to put this another way, Australia is like Aboriginality in being not so much some substantive property as a kind of speaking position. That there is no such thing as Australian art can only be said by an Australian, just as Aboriginal art is a white thing can only be

said by an Aborigine. In an unexpected fashion, Bell's art can be seen to exist on the edge of a decisive historical shift, after which there would no longer be either Aboriginal or Australian art. For all of his work's critique of these two notions, it also undoubtedly needs them. Standing before a 21st-century globalism, Bell's art is in part a thinking of what will be lost in a world in which there are no countries and no cultures. His work preserves Aboriginality and Australia in the only way they can be preserved: as an ongoing questioning of themselves. His work in this sense at once constitutes an irreversible judgement and is the endless suspension of that judgement.

Rex Butler

Author's note: the works written about in this catalogue essay were all part of the James C Sourris collection exhibited on the walls of the Brisbane Club.